

# SPECIAL REPORT

## “Short Game Is Like A Third Down Play In Football”

By Bobby Lopez, PGA Professional



Yes I'm a football fan. Although I must admit I'm disgusted with the salary caps, free agency and the musical chairs played with trades.

First my apologies to anyone who is NOT a football fan but here's the analogy. In football you're permitted four plays or opportunities to gain ten yards down field against your opponent. If you surpass the ten yard minimum you maintain possession of the football and continue to attempt an additional ten yards until you reach the goal line or end zone.

I use the football analogy to play a little game in my mind in hopes of building up confidence in converting what is potentially a bogey into a par or maybe birdie! Here's my method.

**First Down Play** - Applying football to golf....your tee shot is the first down play. If you're second down and twenty all day you're NOT going to win the football game. That's why it's vitally important to get properly fitted for a driver. **A properly fitted driver will be fitted for accuracy NOT distance.** You need to find a way to control your tee shots and position them in the fairway with the BEST angle to approach the green. With a tee shot right down the middle I would consider the second shot a second

down and 5 play. A tee shot in the woods would be a second down and 15.

**Second Down Play** - Your iron approach to the green is important however a poorly played second down play will NOT kill your round of golf. Sure hitting the green in regulation gives you your best opportunity to make a par but there are no pictures on the score card if you make your par from off the putting surface.

**Third Down Play** - Your chip shot, lob shot or bunker shot is a third down play that you **MUST** convert, (*get up on the green and make the putt*) in order to lower your golf scores. Even the best golfers on tour only hit about 60% of their greens in regulation so touring pros are getting up and down, (*scoring a par from off the green*) more than you might think. **Get the ball in the hole off the green for potentially a two shot swing! You were headed for bogey and made birdie!**



I like to classify the difficulty of a third down play by distance, landing area and break. For instance, if you're right on the front edge of the green with a straight up hill chip shot with plenty of green to work with and you're using a low lofted golf club, (*a 6 or 7 iron*) I consider myself a third and two. You should convert most of the time from third and two or three.

I would consider it a third and twenty when you're ball is behind a bunker forcing you to elevate the golf ball with a high lofted golf club

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back to the hole then to dump the ball or “chile dip” it and leave yourself a fourth and twenty!

**Using Lower Loft** - The lower the loft you can use the better your chances for success. Arnold Palmer once said, “my best chip is as good as my worst putt.” Does this suggest that you should always chip with your putter? Not at all! Of course if conditions permit, (*short firm grass between your ball and the putting surface*) go for it. Arnie would!

## The Four Big Keys to Successful Chipping

To be successful on third down plays or chipping you need to dominate three different facets of chipping:

- 1) The Chipping Stroke
- 2) Your Alignment
- 3) Your Choice of Landing Area
- 4) Your Choice in Loft or Golf Club

**1) The Chipping Stroke** - To get a feel for the chipping stroke try taking a three wood and gripping it very low on the shaft and holding the butt of the golf club up against your front forearm. This drill will help you develop a pendulum stroke with limited motion with the hands and help you avoid flipping your hands at impact which is a destroyer of the chipping stroke. Flipping not only adds loft at impact lifting the golf ball higher than expected but the flipping also closes the golf club face at impact pulling the golf ball to the left of the target.

**2) Your Alignment** - I suggest using a hitting station to chip from when practicing. Refer to the picture to see the chipping station I use when I practice. I witness sloppy alignment when teaching chipping. It appears that golfers understand



the importance of aligning a putt and neglect the same careful attention when chipping.

The process I follow is: Make sure the leading edge of your golf club is facing directly at your target landing area. Most golfers leave the club face open or to the right for right handed golfers. You might find that if you leave your club face open you are probably doing the same with your full iron shots as well. Your eye has become accustomed to the look of the open club face so that the club face does NOT look open to you at address when chipping.

**3) Your Choice of Landing Area** - It is to your advantage to use the least amount of loft possible when chipping. Loft equals speed! If you want the ball to roll faster use less loft. The further you are away from your landing area to more loft you need to slow the ball down. Loft or arc will effect how fast the ball travels on the putting surface.

**4) Your Choice in Loft or Golf Club** - The best way to improve your decisions in loft and roll speed is to practice. Find a practice chipping or putting green and work your way around the green chipping from different angles. Chip with a six iron from about three yards off the green. Hit the ball so it flies in the air to about a foot or so on the green and watch it roll the rest of the way. Observe the roll and build a database of situations in your mind so you recognize the similar situation when it presents itself on the golf course.

Try chipping from the same position with an eight iron with the same amount of force to reach your identical landing area chosen for the six iron. Notice how the ball will not have sufficient speed to reach the hole. Then move about three yards further back

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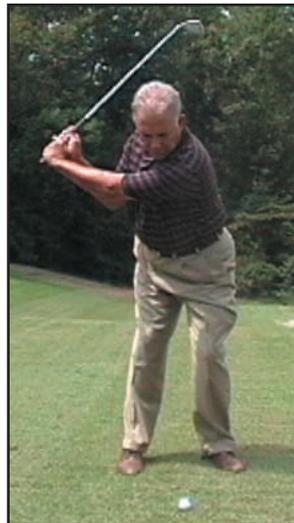
from the green and landing area and try the same shot again with the eight iron. You'll find that the eight iron from further back will roll at the same SPEED that the six iron did from closer to the target or landing area.

Make adjustments accordingly and you'll begin to recognize the amount of roll and loft you need to accomplish any third down and short play. Don't get discouraged when you miss a green in regulation. **Get excited about a recovery!**

When you find yourself far enough away from the green that it requires your lifting the ball in the air so it travels further in the air than what the ball will travel on the ground then you need to add “hinging” to your back swing. The more you hinge, the steeper the angle of attack in the down swing the higher the ball will fly.

Example, if you're behind a bunker and the flag stick is also close to the other side of the bunker, take the highest lofted golf club you have and hinge the golf club immediately upon your take-a-way.

A word of caution here! When attempting to hit a flop shot which requires you open the face of the golf club, swinging underneath the golf ball, DO NOT attempt this shot with your sand wedge. That is of course unless the ground beneath the ball is soft or the grass is tall. The sand wedge by design has more bounce on the sole, meaning a more rounded sole which helps the golf club make contact with the sand further back from the leading edge of the golf club. Being that the leading edge of the golf club in this case would be lifted up off the ground you may find you skull the golf ball or hit the ball with the higher leading edge of the golf club.



For flop shots try a 60 degree wedge which tend to be built with less bounce or curvature on the sole or open the face on your gap wedge if you don't own a lob wedge.

**Playing Out of Bunkers** - It may not seem practical to you but in some cases touring pros prefer being in the bunker along side the green than below the green off to the right or behind the green. Of course you run the risk of getting a difficult lie. However in today's bunkers, that are so well maintained, right smack dab in the middle of the bunker with a decent lie is a very safe shot.

Remember what we discussed earlier about short game....ball speed! Well, controlling the speed of the golf ball out of the bunker is key. Blasting the ball out or swinging as hard as you can straight down behind the ball will not afford you the ability to control the speed of the golf ball.

I open my golf club face as much as possible depending on how far my proposed landing area is. The further away the landing area the less I open the face. Then I hinge the golf club back abruptly and turn my body towards the target holding my hand and arms as quiet or motionless as possible and slip the club head just under the golf ball so that it lifts the ball out slowly toward my landing area. **Remember, Ball Speed Is The Key!**



Try using as little hand and arm action as possible and turning your body or torso. The golf club face should be pointed skyward at the finish of the swing. When making your approach to the sand on your down swing, grab the sand with your club face and try to hold the sand on the face all the way to the finish position.

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The best way to help you improve your short game is for you to attend one of our One Day Golf Schools held at Pendleton Golf Club. The class is very affordable and the class size is kept to a minimum to guarantee you get all the attention you deserve.

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Bobby Lopez is a PGA professional with 43 years of experience in the golf business.

- Host of the Bobby Lopez Golf Hour on ESPN Sports Radio
- Host of Blab TV Richmond television Show “Golf Your Way”
- Toured for the USO as a trick shot show in support of our troops overseas
- PGA professional of choice in local interviews with Big Al Coleman on 950 AM ESPN radio and with WRVA Jimmy Barrett
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